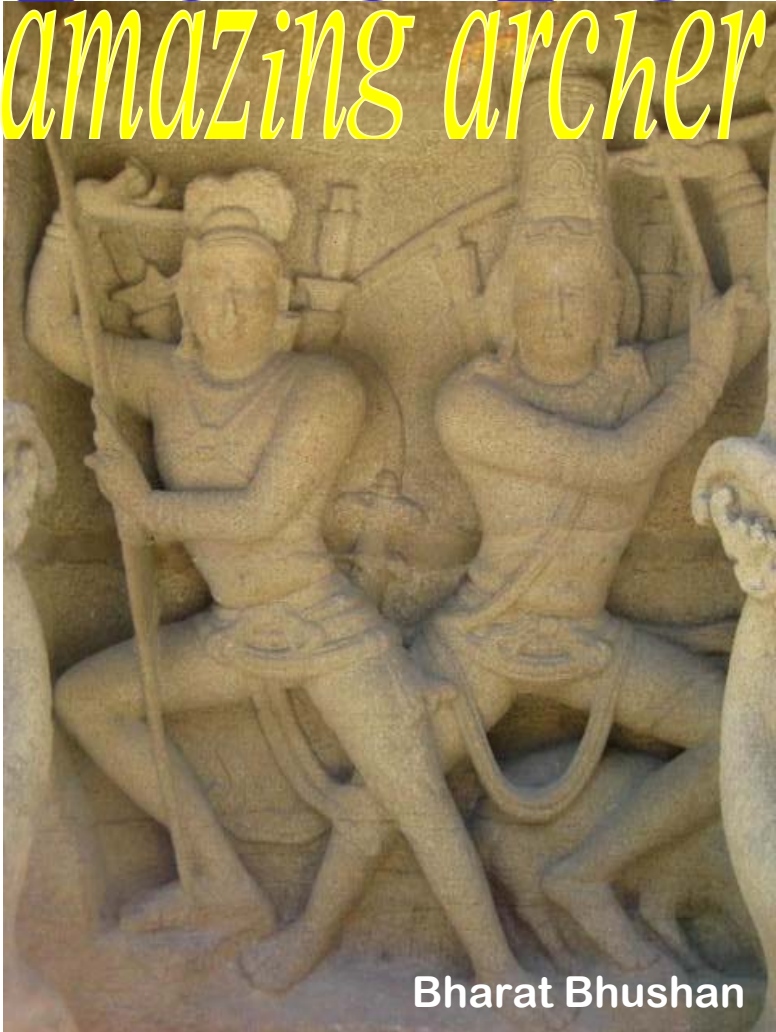


~~rudra~~

amazing archer



Bharat Bhushan



The dedicated sculpture cubicles, at Kailasanathar Temple, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu. Photo: **Bharat Bhushan**

~~rudra~~

amazing archer



Bharat Bhushan

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*In memory of Harini (1987-1991)
she came on a short journey, and made us happy...*

Photographs, Cover Design and Art: Pritvi Bharat
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*In gratitude to friends for creating magic and guiding me –
Sejal Chevli, Neetin Desai and Balaji Jairam Naidu
And my daughter, Pritvi, because of whom I have truly been blessed*

RUDRA – THE AMAZING ARCHER

Keywords: Shiva, Rudra, Mahabharata, Ramayana

Author: Bharat Bhushan

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E-mail : harini.trust@gmail.com

<http://harini-trust.blogspot.com>

***na nonanunno nunnono
nãñã nãñãnanã nanu |
nunno'nunno nanunneno
nãnenã nunnanunнанut ||***

Those with many faces (*nãñãnanã*), he, most certainly (*nanu*) would not be a man (*nanã*), who would face defeat by one who is lesser to him in skills (*una-nunno*). As would be him, who could never be a man (*nã-anã*), as would he, who would attack or harass him who is lesser to him in ability or achievements (*nunnono*). He, who would follow a leader who has never faced defeat (*na-nunnenno*), and whenever in retreat, is never defeated (*nunno'nunno*). He, who would further destroy or, attack the one who is totally defeated (*nunna-nunna-nut*) would never escape the fates of sin (*nãnenã*). – From the *Kiratarjuniya* of *Bharavi*.



Kiratarjuniya battle at Kailasanathar temple, Kanchipuram.

Shiva, answer me when I seek you...

*A single incense stick. Smoke willowing silently upwards.
Prayer beads twirling through my fingers, bead by bead.
I seek you, O Maheshwara, with the words that I know.
O Shankara, I call you, with the words that I love.*

*I dare not tell others that you talk to me, when I call.
I fear the thoughts that they may think me to be mad.
Everyone calls out to their loved ones, to their god.
Why not me? I seek you out every night with the words.*

*I thank you, O Eshwara, for you seem to know my thoughts.
Each time I want to stop praying to you, for fear of others.
Each time I want to stop praying to you, in anger at events.
You come back, with more faith in me, than me in you.*

*Why do you love me, so? Why do you call out to me, thus?
I have to but only think of you, and you answer swiftly.
I try to seek you at a place, any place, and you call me there.
You carry me by yourself, I know, for I can feel the strength.*

*I see you everywhere. You come as friends and strangers.
You seek to help, guide, initiate and yet, allow me to choose.
I seem to have a choice, but I feel helpless within you.
Am I within you, or do I feel that it is you within me?*

*Those who speak of Shiva, of you, of your temple, of praying to you,
They come out of everywhere, and I meet them everywhere.
I did not know them before or will not know them later.
Every devotee speaking your name becomes a good friend, thus.*

*The good man who taught me the shadakshara, and the japa.
The elder who seemed to have no faith in me, but did, later.
The sadhu who insisted that I learn the panchakshara stotra,
I am grateful that you came to me, through each one of them.*

*I fail in my faith, in my devotion, day after day after day,
Those close to me, they ridicule, and feel I play with you,
I close my eyes, and I feel that I play with you, day after day,
And I am happy, that I fail in my faith, in my devotion.*

*You came to me, for sure, when I tried to meet you in rain,
in snow, and at night, up in the Himalayas, at Kedar,
You came to me, to give strength and to help me climb,
And then, you went away, and I seek you, since then.*

*You are unseen as Eshwara at Dondra in Lanka,
and yet, I could meet you and again as Muneswara,
You did not fail me, you did not stop having faith in me,
I could meet you where many others could not, ever.*

*The friend who called me to travel, and helped me do so,
The friend who came with me on my travels, and stayed with me,
The friend who will travel with me, in the future,
I know that they are but, you, O Maheshwara, O Shiva,*

*You have faith in me, even if I test you, day after day,
You know more about me, than I can ever, about you.
I shall seek you, and shall search for you, and will meet you.
The Panchakshara, Om, and the Japa, will never cease.*

Om namah shivaayaa.... Om

Shiva, amazing archer

Astras of the gods

It is thus written in ancient Indian mythology, that there could be more than 3,300 *astras* of the gods, especially the main vedic gods. Some of the important or often-mentioned *astras* include the *brahmastra* and the *pasupatastra*. *Astras* were meant to fight the wars of the gods against demons, asuras and rakshasas. Sometimes, the super-weapons were granted to devout asuras or rakshasas, as a result of stupendous meditation upon Gods. The *Indrastra*, *Asurastra*, *Pramohana-astra*, *Devi-astra*, *Pashupati-astra* or *Pasupatastra*, *Shakti-astra*, and the *Chakra-astra* were used in these wars and are mentioned on various occasions in the puranas.

Indra had his *Vajra*, the thunderbolt, while Shiva was known for his *astras*, the lightning-bolts. The *Hiranyastra* was one of the *vajras* of Indra, the *Marutastra* was the *astra* of the Maruts, and the *Agni-astra*, belonged to Bhairava and Shakti. There are many other similarly significant *astras* that are known to be particularly useful, such as the *Vidyastra*, the weapon of intellect, and the *Vira Jayastra*, the weapon for victory.

There are several weapons known in Hindu mythology. Each super-weapon is ascribed to their specified gods. These include the *Agneyastra*, *Brahmastra*, *Sudarsana Chakra*, *Pasupatastra*, *Trishul*, *Garudastra*, *Varunastra* and the *Narayanastra*. These weapons were used for deliberate purposes. The *Agneyastra* was to invoke fire upon the enemy, the *Nagastra* would bring forth thousands of poisonous snakes and the *Varunastra* was invoked to bring forth water to fight fire.

The *Brahmastra* of Indra or the *Pasupatastra* of Shiva or the *Narayanastra* of Vishnu could only be used once, when invoked in war, against one particular enemy, and therefore had to be

utilised with great care. Upon use, these specific *astras* would return to the original owner. Rama used the Narayanastra in the battle with Ravana. The *astra* was later used by Ashwattama, son of Dronacharya, at Kurukshetra, on behalf of the Kauravas.

Created by Brahma, the *Brahmastra* is supposed to be one of the most deadly weapons ever used in battle. The *Brahmadanda*, another super weapon, which was also created by Brahma, could counter the *Brahmastra*. The warrior could receive the weapon from Brahma after years of dedicated meditation, and only if blessed with the permission to use the *Brahmastra* in battle. It could only be used once in the lifetime of a warrior, and was to be used with great hesitation, for it could destroy the local habitat and cause famine and drought for years to come.

Another weapon, the *Brahmashira*, also created by Brahma, with four times the destructive power of the *Brahmastra*, was supposed to be within the realm of knowledge and with the permission to use in battle, with Arjuna of the Pandavas and Ashwattama, in the army of the Kauravas.

Vishwamitra used the *Brahmastra* in his battle against Vashishta, but was defeated by the use of *Brahmadanda* against the *astra*. Rama is known to have used the *Brahmastra* as his final solution and weapon against Ravana. The Ramayana also mentions the use of the *Brahmastra* by Meghnad against Hanuman during his first visit in search of Sita. Lakshmana had the power to invoke the *Brahmastra*, and wished to do against Meghnad, but was prevented from doing so, by Rama.

Karna wished to use the *Brahmastra* against Arjuna but is unable to do so, as he forgets the invocation, due to an earlier curse by Parashurama. Ashwattama's invocation against Arjuna escapes the target due to Krishna's actions, but retains its momentum until it finds its target in the womb of Uttara, and endangers the unborn Parikshit, son of Abhimanyu.

A rare *astra*, usually never mentioned in other Puranas or the Vedas, is the *Vaishnavastra* of Vishnu, and known to be absolute in its intensity, and a weapon that could not be defeated. Vishnu himself could only withdraw it, after having been shot at the enemy. King Bhagadatta of Prajyogasta (= modern day Myanmar), son of Narakasura, used the *Vaishnavastra* against Arjuna at Kurukshetra without realising that Krishna, the avatar of Vishnu, was the charioteer and could stop the *astra* from killing Arjuna.

The most destructive *astra* of all, the *Pashupati-astra* of Rudra, was the most feared, since it belonged to Durga, the destructive manifestation of Parvati. Blessed by Shiva, *Pashupatinath*, and taught the manner of use of the *astra*, are two of the most significant individuals in the ancient puranas.

Shiva blessed Meghnad, the son of Ravana, in the *Treta Yuga* and Arjuna, the third of the Pandavas, in the *Dvapara Yuga*, with the *Pasupatastra*. Both warriors were instructed to be careful in the use of the *astra*, for it was the most destructive weapon of Shiva, capable of being discharged even by a thought in the mind, eyes, words or a bow. The pre-condition was to use it only for *dharma*.

The paradox is paramount in the nomenclature of the *astras*, when one considers the *pasupatastra*. Shiva, or *Pashupatinath*, is also known as the Lord of the animals, and their protector. So, how could the *pasupatastra* be thus named, to be the most destructive of all, capable of destroying creation itself?



Arjuna in the Kirata-arjuna sculpture at Kailasanathar Temple



Shiva in the Kirita-arjuna sculpture at the Kailasanathar Temple

Shiva, amazing archer *Arjuna seeks Rudra*

The best of the stories about the *astras*, is from the best story of all times, the Mahabharata, and presents two of the most excellent individuals in the pantheon of India's *puranas* (= ancient vedic and pre-vedic epics), Shiva and Arjuna. These epics have been written and re-written by countless ancient authors within the great epics themselves, and also as separate stories that present amazing situations in an epic-poem or ballad or within a collection of other stories.

In brief, Arjuna, the third of the Pandavas, was the hero of the Mahabharata, the chosen one of Krishna and the recipient of the Bhagavad Gita. He was the wielder of the mighty bow, the *Gandiva*, and the one who had the secret of wielding the *Pasupatastra*, given to him by none other than Shiva himself.

Arjuna was the thought-conceived son of celestial Indra, and Kunti, the elder wife of Pandu. He was younger to Yudhishtra and Bhima, and elder to Nakula and Sahadeva. He was the rare and amazing archer who could expertly wield the bow with both the hands, and was thus, known as *Savyasachi*. Similar to the marital exploits of Krishna, *Kaunteya* (= son of Kunti, i.e. Arjuna) is known to have more than forty main wives and perhaps, more than a hundred others.

The Mahabharata mentions four wives, Subhadra, Draupadi, Chintrangada and Ulupi, to be role players who influence him. It is however, his marriage with Draupadi that brings forth the central story of the Mahabharata, and leads to determined enmity and rivalry with his cousins, the Kauravas, and especially, the

eldest, Duryodhana, who could not forgive or forget her scornful laughter, when he slips and falls in the *maya* (= magic) palace at Indraprastha (= modern day Delhi).

There is also an ancient, pre-Mahabharata and pre-Vedic element in the story, in depicting the companionship of Krishna and Arjuna. The former, of course, is the avatar of Vishnu, or Narayana himself, while Arjuna is considered to be an avatar or a manifestation of Nara. Nara and Narayana were steadfast companions from pre-vedic times, and were known as sages, celestial beings and among the core group of *devas* (= gods) from the most ancient of times. If Narayana was to be an avatar on earth, as Krishna, could Nara be left behind? Arjuna is also usually presented as a manifestation of *Adisesha*, the serpent-guardian of Narayana, among his many manifestations of Nara.

Being close to Krishna, during the years leading on to the war to be finally waged at Kurukshetra, Arjuna brings himself to accept and acknowledge the acclamation that he is closer to Krishna, than the other Pandavas or the Kauravas. He is also acknowledged as the most excellent among all the warrior princes, and is duly accepted as the best among the best, by his own teachers, including the perceptor, Dronacharya and the mentor, Kripacharya.

Arjuna, is of course, known mostly for his refusal to wage war against the Kauravas, especially against his own elders, teachers, cousins, uncles and the grandsire, Bheeshma. He places down the mighty *Gandiva* in the chariot, and it requires Krishna to explain to Arjuna that he would have to fight. The advice given by Krishna, as the Bhagavad Gita, is the basis of many a modern book on management in various versions, and has been presented similarly over many thousands of years.

His most famous victory is over Karna, who he did not know as his own elder brother. He did not know that he would eventually kill his elder brother. Arjuna was never told the secret that Kunti held close to herself, that Krishna never disclosed, and that Bheeshma never allowed to be shared. That victory is also particularly significant in the war at Kurukshetra, for it depicts the use of *astras* by Karna and Arjuna, given to them by the Gods for use in the war.

Duryodhana knew that Arjuna was the most dangerous amongst the Pandavas, when the war at Kurukshetra was to begin. Therefore, he asked Karna to focus entirely on Arjuna. Also, when Kunti asked Karna to spare her five sons, he replied, that after the war, she would be left only with five sons, for it would be either Karna or Arjuna, who would be killed in battle. Thus, Karna declared that he would not attempt to kill any of the other Pandavas during the war at Kurukshetra.

Maharathis (= great warriors), Arjuna and Karna, knew that the other was an equal expert, and could not be defeated unless they used weapons received from the Gods themselves, for they had already mastered the weapons made by and used by humans. Dhananjaya, as Arjuna was also known, knew that the warriors to be defeated at Kurukshetra were Bheeshma, Drona and Karna, for none of the other Pandavas could gain victory over these *maharathis*. Arjuna would have to do so, himself.

Arjuna was known to be a favourite disciple of Dronacharya, the perceptor-tutor of war to both the Pandavas and the Kauravas. He was known to be the chosen, being the brother-in-law of Krishna, having married Subhadra. The grandsire, Bheeshma, knew that Arjuna would never stray from the side of his elder brother, Yudhishtra, even if tempted with the kingship of distant kingdoms.

His skill with archery is demonstrated on two occasions in the Mahabharata. In his youth, he shoots at the eye of the parrot, after helping Dronacharya demonstrate the aspect of isolated determination and focus of a warrior. Later, he shoots at the eye of a rapidly moving fish, high up above, by looking at the reflection in the water below, and thus winning the hand of Draupadi in marriage.

Some rare epic-stories mention that Draupadi was blessed by Shiva, in one of her earlier births, of being wedded to five husbands, when in her excitement at being blessed by Maheshwara, she asked five times, excitedly, for a hero-like husband, and it was thus granted.

Another story goes that Draupadi requested Shiva, in one of her earlier births that she should get five of the most impossible hero-like qualities in her husband, and she was blessed with five husbands who would each have one aspect of the most impossible hero-like qualities that she desired.

These stories of Draupadi and her previous births are rarely known or heard, and her association or devotion to Shiva is also rarely mentioned. It is however indeed significant, in the events that were to unfold before the war to be fought at Kurukshetra.

The story of Arjuna obtaining the mighty bow, the *Gandiva*, is depicted in much detail in the Mahabharata. After their earlier period of hiding due to the burning down of the *Iac* palace, and the wedding of Draupadi and Arjuna, the Pandavas returned to Hastinapura. Dhritarastra, father of the ruling Kauravas, upon the advice and guidance of Krishna, decided to establish peace by giving the forested Khandava region to the Pandavas to develop a new kingdom.

Krishna, Yudhishtra, Bhima and Arjuna visited the Khandava forests to determine the manner in which the forests could be removed to make way for a large city. They met *Agni*, the god of fire, at the Khandava forest, who had an earlier problem of having consumed *ghee* (= clarified butter) in disproportionate amounts to wood in several *yagnas* (= sacrificial rituals) by a certain King. The god of fire explained to Krishna that he needed to consume a large forest to cure himself, and offered to help the Pandavas by devouring the Khandava forest.

Agni, the god of fire, had tried to destroy the Khandava forest earlier, but had failed. Takshaka, the king of serpents, and a close friend of Indra ruled the forest. Whenever threatened by fire, Takshaka sought Indra's help, who in turn caused heavy rains and prevented the destructive intentions of the god of fire. Krishna and Arjuna decide to help *Agni*, and thereby remove the Khandava forests to allow for the construction of their new city.

Arjuna, Krishna and *Agni* discussed the strategy to attack Takshaka and counter the eventual battle with Indra's *astras*. Knowing that their weapons could not face up to the wrath of Indra, Arjuna asked *Agni* to help by providing superior weapons, capable of fighting a war against Indra.

Agni sought the blessings of *Varuna*, the god of the oceans, for who else could provide better weapons against the thunderbolts of Indra, that caused unceasing rainfall and thunderstorms. *Varuna* brought forth the mighty bow, the *Gandiva*, made by Brahma himself, and known to be forever victorious in battle. The ocean-god also brought forth a chariot with divine white horses that would never tire and could never be injured in battle.

Armed and blessed, Arjuna and Krishna rode clockwise and anticlockwise, around Khandava and protected *Agni* who began

to consume the forests. Takshaka, the serpent-king, invoked Indra's support and received his thunderbolts and an ensuing rainstorm. The battle between father and son, Indra and Arjuna, was fought over several days, with the Gandiva countering the thunder and rain over Khandava. Arjuna and Krishna won the battle eventually, and the forest was destroyed entirely.

Takshaka, the serpent-king, escaped the destruction and sought sanctuary from Karna. In return, Takshaka promised Karna that he would provide the destructive force to his arrows, by providing the poison to be placed on the tips of the arrows of the King of Anga. In gratitude and by providing a safe haven, Karna placed Takshaka in a vital role in the eventual battle to be fought at Kurukshetra.

There was another important individual who escaped the wrath of *Agni* on Khandava. Maya, an *asura*, came out of the fire, and sought sanctuary with Arjuna. The elder brother, Yudhishtra, knowing Maya's capabilities, offered him the task of constructing the city of Indraprastha, to be built on the Khandava forest lands, in the aftermath of *Agni's* hunger for wood. Maya, a master architect, constructed the magical palace of Indraprastha, known after him as the *Mayasabha*, that was the eventual cause of Duryodhana's jealousy, the scorn of Draupadi, the venue of the game of dice to be played, and the disrobing of *Panchali* (= Draupadi) by Dushasana and the eventual exile of the Pandavas.

It is in the fifth year of the exile imposed by the Kauravas, that Arjuna, Krishna, Yudhishtra and Bhima discussed the eventual Great War that would have to be fought on their return to Hastinapura. They knew that Duryodhana would not be gracious and would not return the kingdom of Indraprastha. Yudhishtra decided that they should utilise their years of exile in preparing for war, and in ensuring that Arjuna, their best *Maharathi*,

should be equipped with the best of weapons, including those from the Gods themselves.

Krishna advised Arjuna to travel to the higher reaches of the Himalayas and meditate upon Shiva and seek his blessings to receive the most powerful of weapons that would be needed in critical moments of the eventual Great War. Krishna was aware that the most important battle would be between Karna and Arjuna. He was keen that Arjuna should most definitely win the battle with Karna, and was also aware that Goddess Durga had herself blessed the King of Anga earlier, to allow him to use her *Shakti-astra* in battle.

To counter the several super-weapons that Karna, Bheeshma, Drona, Kripacharya and other *Maharathis* would have in their possession, it was necessary that Arjuna should seek the blessings of Rudra himself, the ultimate master of the *astras*, super-weapons and the science of their use in war. Krishna, who was aware that he was an avatar of Vishnu, knew that Shiva's help would be most important, and if received, the Pandavas would not lose. Arjuna would be blessed by the best of the warriors among the Gods.

The Pandavas in exile, in their fifth year, discussed the eventuality of having to wage war against the Kauravas to repossess their kingdom. A spy returned from Hastinapura with the news that Duryodhana and Sakuni had determined that they would not return Indraprastha to the Pandavas after their exile. Yudhishtra knew that this was to be expected and informed the Pandavas about Duryodhana's plans.

Bhima and Draupadi became angry and felt that they were wasting their best years in exile when they could easily go to war and win against the Kauravas, since Duryodhana would not

honour his promise to return the kingdom. Yudhishtra refused the suggestion, indicating that they would need to continue in exile since they had given their word and would have to live by it.

Draupadi, upset with Yudhishtra, and asked as to how he could agree to live by his word when it was obvious that Duryodhana would not keep up the other side of the agreement. Bhima was determined that war was the only answer, and they would need to break their agreement and return from exile. Bhima felt that it would be humiliating to have to receive their kingdom from Duryodhana rather than winning it on the battlefield.

Yudhishtra did not agree with Bhima and Draupadi and insisted that he would rather stay on the correct side of *dharma* (= the rightful way of life) and would want for the Pandavas to continue with the exile. The great Maharishi Veda Vyasa visited the Pandavas at that moment and discussed the possibility of war with the Kauravas and Duryodhana's determination to refuse to return Indraprastha after the period of exile.

The Pandavas discussed the need to prepare for the war with the Kauravas, for it would be the final battle, and they would need to win, by defeating and killing their own cousins, and also the other great kings and rulers and tribes who would come to support Duryodhana. It would be necessary for the Pandavas to also seek support and agreements from other kings, rulers and tribes to fight the war against the Kauravas.

Yudhishtra and Vyasa agreed that they could depend upon Krishna to seek out kings, rulers and other tribes to decide if they would support the Pandavas and fight the Great War on their side, against the Kauravas. Who else, other than Krishna, could get the many kings and rulers to agree to fight on the side of the Pandavas, who did not even have a kingdom to defend?

However, Vyasa suggested to Yudhishtra, that it would have to be Arjuna who would have to travel away from the Pandavas and seek help from Rudra and Indra, for obtaining the blessings and the secret *mantras* (= incantations) to use super-weapons, or *astras*, if the gods would bless them with their support. Vyasa advised the Pandavas that they would need to prepare during their later years of exile in planning for the eventual Great War with the Kauravas.

The great Maharishi suggested that Arjuna should proceed to the higher Himalayas and place himself in strenuous meditation to propitiate his divine father, Indra, and seek his blessings and gain the ability to use the *Brahmastra* and other *astras*. Draupadi agreed with Veda Vyasa and reminded Arjuna that the attempt would be better than wasting away the years in exile and doing nothing. She emphasised that Partha (= Arjuna) should be very determined in his meditation and should ensure that he would return with the super-weapons of Indra to avenge her humiliation by the Kauravas in front of her exalted and supposedly expert warrior husbands.

Arjuna traveled away from the Pandavas and Draupadi with a heavy heart, and reached the higher Himalayas, beyond the peak of Kailasa. He settled down in meditation at the Indrakila peak, the abode of the gods. Arjuna established a routine of determined and austere meditation and created waves of focused energy, seeking Indra, and disturbing the heavens. The gods decided to test him and sent forth heavenly and divine damsels. These *apsaras* traveled through the heavens, singing and dancing and indulging in tempting behaviour that would disturb a steadfast warrior-sage.

The damsels came about, near Arjuna, and began to try and disturb him from his meditation. They had a goal, and that was to

try and get Arjuna to fall in love with them. They failed in their attempts, for instead of getting Arjuna to fall in love with them, the heavenly *apsaras* fell in love with the great warrior.

Knowing that his son sought him, and stayed determined in his search, Indra came to the Indrakila Mountains, to bless Arjuna. However, the father wished to test the son, and therefore, disguised as a mortal sage, he enquired from Arjuna about why would a person resort to meditation, a method that was to be utilised only after one had given away all his possessions and material life.

The sage-Indra asked Arjuna if he would succeed in his mission through meditation, if the goals were contrary to austerities and he were to retain his possessions, wage war, and protect his kingdom and would eventually continue as a King. Would that not be against the principles of *dhyana* (= meditation) and asceticism? For after all, asceticism did imply the aspect that all material wealth was fickle, and there would also be a time and moment when they could also lose the kingdom and whatever they would possess, even if they would win the war.

Arjuna explained his actions and the need to resort to meditation and told the sage-Indra that the determination to be on the correct side of *dharma* required one to explore and seek all options and opportunities. If war was to be fought, to allow for people to live honorable lives, and if evil was to be vanquished, then it was in the role of rulers to fight on behalf of those who could not do so. Arjuna explained in great detail to sage-Indra about rightful living, the dignity of human lives, the role of hte king, and the need to retain the security of the kingdom.

Pleased, the sage-Indra revealed his true self, and Indra, in his divine form, appreciated the determination of Arjuna and his

understanding of the aspects of war, especially against one's own cousins and elders. Indra advised Arjuna that it would not be sufficient to assume that seeking the use of the great *astras* would be enough, for it would also need to be understood that other great warriors, kings and rulers would also have sought and received similar blessings.

Indra knew that Karna, Ashwattama, Bheeshma, Dronacharya, Kripacharya, Duryodhana and Jayadratha were tremendous warriors and knew the many intricate aspects of using the best of weapons and super-weapons. Several other kings, great warriors and demi-gods, asuras, rakshasas and forest-tribes would also assemble for such a war. The grandsire Bheeshma alone could match any warrior, war for war, strategy for strategy, weapon for weapon and would never tire.

Indra informed Arjuna that he would certainly bless his own son with the weapons that he desired, but it would also be necessary that he should gain the use of far greater and more dangerous weapons. Arjuna would have to continue with his meditation and seek the blessings of Rudra, or Shiva himself, and request for the use of the most tremendously dangerous weapons. Later, Arjuna could return to Indra, and he would gain access to the thunderbolts and other *astras* and learn about their use in detail.

Knowing that Indra was correct, Arjuna agreed with him, and continued in his meditation, seeking out Rudra.

Kiratarjuniya – the battle

The Kiratas are people of the higher Himalayas, and Rudra, or Shiva, was known to be Kirata-Raja (= King of the Kiratas). Known to be lion-like (= *Kira*) in courage, the Kiratas were once assumed to be the mythical lion-headed tribes, known as the *Kimpurushas*. Known also from the Ramayana, the Kiratas are mentioned by Rama in the Yoga Vasishta, and are known to be geographically close to the *Ahura-desa* (= modern day Iran). From pre-vedic times, the Kiratas were known to be followers of Shiva, and participated in his rituals, wars and ceremonies.

As Kirata-Raja, Rudra was always depicted as a tribal chieftain, an expert archer, and protector of the local lands. The Kiratas were devoted to their king, and knew that he would never fail them. They protected their lands, animals and waters from outsiders, whenever threatened.

This was one of the main reasons that they tolerated the presence of Arjuna in their region, while he meditated upon Shiva. For, after all, the outsider sought the blessings of their own Kirata-Raja. He had not hunted their animals and had not attempted to take away their lands. The Kiratas knew that this ascetic-meditator had entered their land more than five months ago.

Arjuna had clad himself in rags, deerskin and fed himself with withered leaves, picked from the ground. During the first month, he ate fruits from the forest, once in three days, and during the second month, once in six days. In the third month, Arjuna ate only twice, and in the fourth, he stopped eating completely. He supported himself solely by inhaling air. During the fourth and the fifth month, he stood on his toes, without any support to lean upon, with arms upraised.

The severity of the austerities practiced by Arjuna created tremendous energy around him and caused him to be noticed by the sages, gods and demi-gods in the region. They did not know of the purpose of his meditation, but they did know that the chosen favourite of Krishna was determined in his focus upon seeking the blessings of Rudra.

Shiva knew the purpose of Arjuna's meditation and also knew that the Pandava prince had brought his weapons with him and would be ready to use them if required. He wanted to test the young prince and determine if he would be the correct person to accept the responsibility of using the super weapons. How would he be able to disturb one who was strongly determined, and had been able to resist the best of divine damsels, the *apsaras*, of Indra? The answer would be to seek out Arjuna's vanity as an expert archer, and tempt him to interrupt his meditation.

Shiva sought out Muka, an *asura*, from the Kirata forests, who resided within the form of a wild boar and had been troubling and terrorising the local people. Muka, disturbed by Shiva within his mind, could not think calmly or stay at peace, and ran amuck, charging and attacking anyone who came in his way, and thus, came to charge at Arjuna who was seated peacefully, focused in his *dhyana* about Shiva. Being disturbed by the charge of the rampaging wild boar, and immediately without adequate forethought, reacting only as a warrior would, Arjuna armed his *Gandiva*, the mighty bow, and released an arrow, in the form of a poisonous snake, that found its mark, by sinking deep into Muka, the boar.

At the very moment, another arrow found its mark into Muka, and seemed to have hit the wild boar deep into its heart, where Arjuna's arrow had gone through. Arjuna walked up to the Boar to seek and claim his prize, and discovered the second arrow,

also in the form of a poisonous snake, and was amazed. Both the arrows had pierced the wild boar sharply and clearly. Arjuna could realise that an expert archer must have shot at the same moment.

Gazing around, he saw a group of Kirata men and women standing nearby, with one, who was taller and seemed like their leader, bearing a longish bow and carrying a quiver of arrows, in the form of poisonous snakes. The Kirata-leader spoke to one of the men in the group, who came up to Arjuna and asked him to surrender the wild boar, for, as he stated, it was the arrow of his leader that killed the animal. Arjuna refused, insisting that it was his own arrow that had pierced the wild boar before the other arrow, and it was by his arrow that the animal was dead, and therefore, he would not allow the Kirata to take it away.

The Kirata returned and spoke to the Kirata-leader, who walked up to Arjuna, accompanied by an astoundingly beautiful lady, distinctively different from the other women in the group of Kiratas. The Kirata-leader carried his large and seemingly heavy bow and the quiver with ease and said, “O ascetic, why do you claim the animal when you seem to be practicing austerities without food? How do you dare to hunt animals in our lands? This animal is mine, for it is by my arrow that it was killed. I do claim the animal and I will take it with me.”

Arjuna, in his mind, the favoured one of Krishna, the best of the warriors known to Drona, Bheeshma and Kripa, and the vanquisher of Indra in the battle for the Khandava forests, was amazed at the audacity of this tribal warrior in these remote lands. How did this forestland warrior even have the courage to speak to him and challenge him for his prize? Perhaps it was because his people and the beautiful lady, who seemed to be his spouse, accompanied him.

Arjuna asked the Kirata-leader, “Who are you, O warrior from these forests? How dare you challenge me? Who are you to question me about the purpose of my austerities for my Shiva?”

“This animal was but the garb of an asura, who desired to attack me,” Arjuna said, “I killed him, and freed the *daanava* from his life-skin within the animal. The body of the animal belongs to me, whether I consume it or not. It is the manner of the hunt, and of the result of the arrow that flew out of this magnificent bow that I possess. Do not challenge me, O warrior of these forests, for I am a renowned warrior from a royal lineage, and I could easily defeat you. Go away, with your people, and live in peace somewhere else.”

Shiva, as the Kirata-leader, smiled at Arjuna’s ego, and replied, “O warrior from the plains, for it is obvious that you are not from our mountains, why is it that you chose this very place of our very own Indrakila Mountains? This is our kingdom, and all the people, animals, land, water and trees belong to us. Even if we assume that it was your arrow that killed the animal, it still belongs to me. And, we take what belongs to us.”

“Your talk of war, of fighting us, does not frighten warriors of the Himalayas. We do not need to be renowned and we do not belong to royal families. We belong here, and we know how to defend ourselves. You have come here to practice your austerities, and to search for your gods. Go ahead and do your task. Leave the hunting and killing to us, for the animals of these regions belong to us.”

Angered by the disdain and scorn of the Kirata-leader, Arjuna picked up his *Gandiva*, strung an arrow in it, and said, “O warrior of these mountains, beware of my magnificent bow, for I have armed it with one of the most powerful of arrows. Once

armed, I cannot but use it against anyone whom I consider to be my enemy. By your persistence in opposing me, and in your determination to take away this animal, that is my prize, I would have no other option but to challenge you to fight me for its possession. It is a definite possibility that you would perhaps lose your life in fighting me. Beware.”

At these words of challenge, the Kirata-leader actually seemed pleased, and appeared to have become more resplendent in stature, and taller. He seemed to be eager to fight with Arjuna, who looked keen to shoot his arrow, kill the Kirata-leader and get the battle completed. He wanted to return to his austerities and focus upon Shiva.

The Kiratas looked totally eager at the prospect of a battle by the Kirata-leader, and were obviously confident of the Kirata-Raja's prowess. Arjuna did not realise that he would have been seen to be incapable of a battle, for he had thinned down after his austerities in favour of Indra and later, Shiva. The *Gandiva* seemed taller and larger than the ascetic-warrior. On their part, the Kiratas were also keen that their King should be able to take over the prize that they assumed to be theirs.

Weapon to weapon, the *Gandiva* was obviously the superior one, thought Arjuna, and yet, the arrows in each quiver seemed similar. They shone in their brilliance, looking like poisonous snakes drawn taut, waiting to release their venom at the moment of impact. The arrows shook, impatient in their quivers, the heat of their energies bringing forth sparks of fire, and made them appear more eager than the warriors for the battle to begin.

The tall and beautiful woman alongside the Kirata-leader seemed to be pleased with the aspect of the battle to be fought, and looked confident that the Kirata-Raja would definitely win

against the ascetic-warrior. Arjuna kept glancing at the lady, but found himself incapable of looking at her straight in the eyes. He could not watch her for more than a moment.

The Kirata-leader picked up his bow, and in the eyes of Arjuna, the weapon seemed to grow, and become larger and glowing like a wand of fire. The Kirata-Raja looked happy and eager to fight. At the very moment, the sounds of the birds, the flowing water and all of creation seemed to cease. A golden glow enveloped the skies, as if the gods were keen to watch Rudra about to begin battle with the warrior son of Indra.

Arjuna stood near the slain Muka, narrowing his focus away from the forests around him, away from the dead animal, away from the beautiful lady whom he could not dare watch for more than a fleeting moment, and brought himself to focus upon the Kirata-leader as his target. The arrow was already in the *Gandiva*, ready to fly away, seeking its destiny, and the great bow seemed to know that there was a battle to be fought.

The *Gandiva* was ready, and so was Arjuna. He released the arrow and it sped away to seek the Kirata-leader in a very minute fraction of a moment. And yet, the Kirata seemed to have all the time that he needed. He strung his bow after Arjuna had released the *Gandiva*, aimed at the speedily approaching arrow and hit it cleanly with his own arrow, and followed up rapidly with another arrow that sped away towards the ascetic-warrior. Arjuna was amazed. He had never met a warrior who was able to meet the arrows from the *Gandiva* in mid-air and react faster than this Kirata.

The ascetic and the Kirata fought their battle, arrow for arrow, swifter than the earlier, without being able to hit each other. They seemed the equal, both amazing archers, with their bows

like a natural extension to their arms, and the arrows like mere additional fingers on their palms. They knew their quivers, and knew the arrows without looking at them. They knew the arrows to choose, and react with, by looking at the arrow that the other would shoot. Their quivers seemed to work with them, with unending arrows that kept appearing within, eager, excited and full of energy, anticipating the moment that they would be chosen and allowed to search for the best of the warriors, ever.

Realising that lone arrows were not going to be able to pierce the skills of the Kirata-warrior, Arjuna released a shower of arrows on him, each one capable of decimating powerful and skilled warriors. The Kirata, Rudra himself, smiled, and met the shower, arrow for arrow, separately, disdainfully, with his own shower of arrows, and magically brought up more time to be able to release a separate shower of arrows at the ascetic-warrior.

Amazed, Arjuna wondered about the battle and about the Kirata-King. Who could he be? So unlike the other Kiratas, and amazingly skilled in battle, and able to meet the challenge of Dhananjaya himself and to be able to fight with better abilities. Very few warriors could fight with such skills. Drona, his perceptor, Bheeshma, the grand-sire, Kripa, his mentor, Krishna, his beloved friend and, perhaps Karna, on a chosen day, could match the abilities of Arjuna in battle. But, none of them, on any of their best days, could have shown their prowess in archery as the Kirata on that day.

The Kirata, understanding Arjuna's puzzlement, taunted him, "O ascetic, why do you not cease? Not a single one of your arrows has touched me. Why do you carry such a mighty bow, if you cannot use it properly? You seem to have an excellent collection of arrows, and an unending quiver. But, obviously, you do not know how to fight a battle. I am, but merely a forest-warrior,

wandering about in these high Himalayas, shooting my arrows only for hunting in these forests. You are not even able to fight me. Why do you waste your time to meditate? On whom do you meditate? What would be the use of your meditation, if you cannot even fight against a lone forest-dweller?”

Angered by the words, continuing with the shower of arrows against each other, Arjuna replied, “O warrior from these remote hills, you are indeed lucky, for I do not have the strength to fight you properly. I have been practising austerities for the past many months and do not seem to be able to attack you with better strength. My *Gandiva* does not fail me. It is I who fail my bow. If I had been stronger, you would not have been alive after my first arrow. A mere twang of my *Gandiva* would have been enough in my stronger days to have fear flowing through yourself and among your people in this region. Today, I am not strong enough, but I am indeed sufficient to kill you. You will not live to see the next day, and for this, I apologise to the lady with you, for I will kill you.”

The Kirata smiled, and answered Arjuna with an ever-increasing shower of arrows that tested the great warrior to his ultimate skills. The arrows of the Kirata challenged Arjuna by coming dangerously closer and closer. Partha wondered about the Kirata, thinking to himself. Who could this amazing archer be? He was certainly not a mere warrior from these hills, as he said. There could not be a greater archer than himself, and if there had been, he would have known. The gods themselves had spoken to him, and Indra, his celestial father, who knew everything, would have told him or warned him about coming to the Indrakila Mountains. His perceptor-tutor, Drona, had put an end to Ekalavya’s ambitions, but that was another place and another time. There had been no other equal archer since then.

Arjuna wished for the battle to be over with, and wanted to get back to his austerities to focus upon Shiva, to seek Rudra, and return to his brothers, to Draupadi and to Krishna. At that very moment, when he desired to return to Shiva, Arjuna faltered, and his quiver seemed to fail him, for he did not have an arrow ready to fly from the *Gandiva*. The *Gandiva*'s quiver had failed Arjuna. The Kirata had a bunch of arrows ready in his bow, about to be released. Arjuna's thoughts had been on Shiva, and wanted to seek him out, and, at that moment, the Kirata seemed to be unable to let his arrows leave his bow.

Arjuna's arrows were exhausted, and he wondered about Agni, the god of fire, and his assurance, when he had blessed him with the *Gandiva* and its never-ending quiver. Who could this mysterious archer be, he who could withstand the never-ending shower of arrows from the mighty *Gandiva*?

Was he a magical yaksha or asura, playing with his mind, wanting to make Arjuna believe that the mighty *Gandiva* did not have any more arrows? Did Agni, the god of fire, actually fail him, or did Arjuna fail the mighty *Gandiva* in some manner? He had come here, to these remote upper Himalayas, to the Indrakila Mountains, further than the high Kailasa, to meditate. How had he got involved in a battle?

Getting angrier, and deciding to end the battle, even if there were no further arrows, Arjuna picked up the *Gandiva* like a mace, wanting to attack the Kirata-warrior, and kill him, like Bhima would have done. He rushed up to the Kirata, dodging his arrows, and attempted to hit him with the mighty bow. The forest-warrior, Rudra himself, merely dodged the attack, and plucked the enormous *Gandiva* from Arjuna's hands, like he would have pulled off a branch from a tree, and threw it aside, away from either of them.

Furious, that there could be a warrior who could lift the mighty *Gandiva*, leave alone pull it out of his hands, and throw it away in scorn, Arjuna lost all reason. He pulled out his sword, with the golden hilt, to attack the Kirata. He attacked the forest-warrior, and hit him on the head, with his strong sword. Even a weaker attack than this would have killed many a stronger warrior, and yet, the sword shattered upon coming into contact with the head of the Kirata.

The forest-warrior did not seem to want to retaliate and bore the attack with a smile. This angered Arjuna further, and he rushed about, picking up stones, rocks and trees, uprooting them, and attacking the Kirata, throwing them at him, without any strategy or warrior-like methods.

He seemed to have lost all his abilities, and was fighting like any mere struggler would have, using the weapons that he could get access to. The Kirata-warrior was not injured, and did not get disturbed by the strange and desperate attack. He stood, smiling, and patient, further angering Arjuna, who finally reached the Kirata, and kept hitting him with his fists, blow after blow, without any thought, but straining to want the forest-warrior to suffer and be killed.

Arjuna's fists seemed to hit the Kirata with the energy and strength of Indra's thunderbolts, and the forests and mountains around reverberated in the sounds, and the Gods above rejoiced in watching the battle. Devi Parvati, as the Kirata-warrior's spouse, stood patiently, indulgent, in allowing her Mahadeva to have his amusement. She, who was the embodiment of various manifestations of destructive and nurturing energies, of Shakti, Durga and Mahakali and of being the very thought of the flames of Agni, stood quietly, watching the battle between Arjuna, the son of Indra and her beloved lord, Shiva.

Within himself, and not noticing anything around him, inconsolable in his anger that had taken over every aspect of his being, in not being able to win against this mere forest-warrior, Arjuna moved closer, realising that his mighty thunder-like blows were no match to the Kirata. He spread his mighty arms, which had known battle only with the bow, the sword and the mace, and clasped the Kirata to his breast and tried to crush him in a fierce embrace.

Arjuna used all his strength, wanting to end the battle, by killing the Kirata. The forest-warrior, Shiva himself, smiled and allowed Arjuna to indulge in his own fervour. The energy of the two great warriors in close embrace brought forth great amounts of smoke, and created myriad images of a celestial battle. The Kirata broke free of the embrace and raised both his arms, clenched the palms together and hit Arjuna with all his force, as only Shiva could, and caused him to fall unconscious. The battle was over.

Rudra – the amazing archer and the supreme warrior

Upon regaining consciousness, Arjuna was disconsolate at being defeated by a mere forest-dwelling warrior in these remote regions. The temptation to kill the wild boar had led him to stray from his austerities and his determination to focus upon Shiva. He knew that he had done wrong. For, how could the animal have harmed him when he was deep in his meditation upon Shiva? What if the animal had harmed him or killed him? Would he not have achieved his objective and would he not have reached Shiva faster?

It would have been Shiva's task to have faced the wild boar, rather than assume that he, Arjuna, should have to resort to his aspect as a warrior and the wielder of the mighty *Gandiva*, and divert himself from his current determination to be an ascetic in these regions, in search of Shiva.

Deciding to return to his austerities in search of Shiva's blessings, Arjuna created a clay linga in front of the Kiratas, and offered flowers and began worshipping Shiva with tremendous affection. The Kiratas stood nearby, silent, while the Kirata-King, Shiva himself, and Devi Parvati, as yet in the garb of the local forest dwellers, waited patiently. How could Shiva disturb his own devotee in his prayers, and how could he not accept the worship?

Arjuna felt a sense of calm and happiness spread within him, and opened his eyes, while continuing to chant the *Shadakshara Mantra* (= the six-syllable mantra = *Om Namah Shivaya*). To his surprise, he found that the flowers that he had offered were no longer on the clay linga and began to search for them.

And, there they were, strung as a garland, and around the neck of the Kirata-Raja, who stood at a distance, glowing in a golden hue, tall, with flowing hair, his bow and quiver shivering in anticipation. Puzzled, Arjuna stood up and approached the Kirata. As he came nearer, the Kirata-King and his spouse seemed to change within his eyes, and the image became clearer and clearer.

Arjuna was instantly dismayed at the obvious realisation. How could he have been so blind? How could he have succumbed to his ego in such a manner? How could he have not realised that the best of warriors, the most amazing of archers, Mryutyunjaya himself, had come to challenge him?

Immediately, at the very moment of realisation, Arjuna felt an absolute sense of happiness and satisfaction. The guilt at being distracted from his meditation and the stubborn persistence to fight with Maheshwara himself was forgotten. His inability to be victorious in the battle as an archer against the most amazing archer seemed to be as much a victory for having tested himself against Mahadev. Arjuna rushed over to the Kirata-Raja and prostrated at his feet, overcome with bliss and contentment. Nothing could be better than this very moment, Arjuna felt, at being in the presence of Shiva and Devi Parvati, in their lands, in the upper Himalayas, among their *ganas* (= Shiva's followers at Kailasa, the Kiratas).

Shiva was pleased, and was happier to see the effect that the austerities of the previous months had inflicted on Arjuna's body. He saw the blood from the battle had covered Arjuna's body, and yet, he could understand the sense of victorious achievement that the warrior-ascetic felt upon realising defeat at Rudra's hands.

Shiva bade Arjuna to rise, and said, -

*“O Dhananjaya, you who have no parallel
among any archer,
you who are so close to my own heart,
for being so close to Kesava,
you who are similar in skills
in wielding the mighty bow,
like Vishnu had been,
when born as Rama,
I am happy.”*

*“You were able to fight me,
arrow to arrow, battle for battle,
and never ceased.
You are truly at your pinnacle,
for there are none who have fought me
and survived, and if they did,
it was at my pleasure.”*

“I am happy with you, O Partha, for you have risen above your existence as a warrior, and you have risen higher in your search and determination, and thus, you have risen much higher, from your status as a prince, who need not have inflicted such punishment upon himself. Indra’s son, you are so close to Madhava himself, you did not need to choose to wander about in the forests and yet, you did so.”

“You fought me, and you fought me truly well. The mighty *Gandiva*, the chosen weapon of the gods themselves, is safe with you, and I know, as do the other gods, that you will use it excellently in war. Your never-ending quiver, the mighty *Gandiva* with you, your knowledge of the most supreme of *mantras* for use of the best of *astras*, will never fail you in battle,

for you and the Pandavas are soon to go into the biggest battle of all time. It will be spoken of and mentioned for several hundreds of generations to come, and the gods themselves will be watching you, Muralidhara, Bhima, Abhimanyu, Duryodhana, Bheeshma, Drona, Kripa, Karna and several other *maharathis*, fight the greatest of battles.”

“I am aware of the reason for your search for me. You are the most able of all the warriors who would fight in the Great War to come. You are truly the best among them to receive the most ferocious of *astras* that I possess, and I know that it is only you who could utilise them at the correct moment and retain them with the responsibility that they would require. My *astras* can destroy enormous numbers of people, extensive regions, tremendous aspects of creation, or all of creation itself.”

“I shall give you the weapons that you so desire. Use them wisely and cautiously. Even the gods cannot be trusted to use the *astras* as I would want them to. They would be tempted to experiment, destroy and disturb the aspects of creation in this world and in the entire cosmos, and they would not know how to correct their mistakes. You will need to decide the use of the *astras* that you would receive from me, with great caution, and avoid any other use for them. I know that you can be trusted, for otherwise, Vishnu in his two splendid parallel manifestations, as Madhava and as Krishna Dwaipayana, or Maharishi Veda Vyasa, would not have asked you to seek me, and Indra, your father, would not have asked you to seek my weapons.”

Arjuna rose from his prostrate position at the feet of his beloved Mahadeva, and sat, on one knee, and gazed at the amazing archer and his mighty bow, quiver and at Devi Parvati standing next to him. He realised that he was looking upon Kailasapati himself, glowing in his brilliance, with the most beautiful Uma, and

worshipped them with all humility and grace. Speechless, as anyone would be thus rendered, he struggled to find words and convey his prayers.

Raising both his hands in supplication, Arjuna said, “My beloved lord, O Umapati, O Kailasanatha, O Mahadeva, you, who would also be accepted so easily by the Kiratas as their King, I worship you. My beloved Madhava, he who would always speak of your prowess as the ultimate horizon for any warrior, for any seeker of knowledge, for any yogi, for any ascetic, for any artiste, for any humble householder, I worship you.”

“You are the first among all gods. O Mahadeva, I am content to be merely in your presence. Who would achieve any better reward in war or in battle, than to be able to be in your presence, even if in silence and in your contemplation? I would not desire your weapons and I would not desire to wage any battle, if I could but continue to stay in your presence, and worship you, and Devi Parvati, for ever, as long as I live.”

“O Neelakanta, you of the blue throat, of the one who swallowed the poison to save the gods, O Jataadhara, you of the long locks, matted and tied in tresses, of the one who slowed the Ganges, I am content to be in your presence. You are the cause of the cosmos, and it is you, who is the first creator, the cause of Brahma himself, I am most blessed to be in your presence. The gods come to you when they are threatened, and yet, you are the cause of the blessings that they would bestow on their devotees.”

“O Nageshwara, O Trylokeshwara, the one who cannot be defeated by the gods, the asuras or any man. You are Shiva, in the form of Vishnu, and you are Vishnu, in the form of Shiva. You are the cause of the destruction of Daksha’s yagna. You caused the conception of Mahakali and Veerabhadra. You are the

one with three eyes. You are Hari, Shiva and Rudra. I seek your presence and if thus granted, I would not seek any other blessing from you, O Harihareshwara.”

“O Maheshwara, O Rudra, you who carry the Pinaka, you who are the origin of sound itself, with your Damaru, you who are the origin of all waters in this world, you who are known as Nandeeswara, because of the one who serves you, you who are known as Parvateswara, because of the one who loves you, I am the most grateful for your presence. You are the cause of all blessings, as you are the cause of whatever the blessings would achieve, O Ganadhipati, the lord of the *Ganas*, you are the first among all men, and also, the one who is sublime to all forms of love. I worship you, O Digambara.”

“I seek your blessings, and before I seek what you would in any case bestow on your devotee, I seek your forgiveness. I seek strength in being able to fight my ego, in being able to fight my lack of humility. I seek that all-knowing third eye, to be able to see through all situations, and events, and relations. I dared to fight you, and you did not punish me. I dared to lift my *Gandiva* against you, and you did not kill me. You could have killed me easily, with your arrows, and yet you did not. Your arrows could have easily pierced me without any effort, and yet you did not do so. I am aware that it was your own blessings to allow me to continue to fight with you, without your arrows finding their mark within me. You could have easily killed me with your very first arrow, but you did not do so. Each arrow from your bow was a blessing to me.”

“O Sankara, forgive me. You are the beloved of my Krishna, O Rudreswara, I seek your forgiveness for my arrogance, for my ego, for having fought against you. O Yogi, O Yogeswara, it is your asceticism and patience that allowed me to fight you for

such a long time, as you did. I seek your blessings. I worship you, with all my devotion. I worship you, on behalf of all the good deeds that my mother would have accomplished, on behalf of all the good deeds that my brothers would have achieved. I seek your grace in understanding my faults. I seek your benevolence in understanding that my challenge to the most amazing archer of all, O Pasupateshwara, my war against you was born out of pure ignorance of your presence.”

Maheshwara smiled, as did Uma, and took Arjuna’s hands in his own, and blessed him, with all his love and affection, as only he can. Shiva said, “O beloved of Kesava, O Kaunteya, O Phalguna, you can never commit a wrong, for you are the cause of all actions that my Hari would cause to happen. You, who are close to my Hari, can never be seen to be in the wrong of Hara. You, who spoke of my Nandi, who spoke of my beloved Parvati, who spoke of my beautiful Kailasa, who thought of me as Vishnu, and thought of Vishnu as Shiva, stay happy. You do not need to be forgiven. Arise, my Partha, for you are close to Vishnu, and are as excellent an archer as he was, as Rama. It was my bow, that Hari chose as Rama, as did he earlier, as the wielder of the great axe, as Parasurama, and it is yet he, who sends you, to seek the most powerful of all weapons, the most dangerous of all *astras*, the *Pasupata*.”

“You were Nara, as the perpetual companion of Narayana himself. You, O Arjuna, as Nara, you were an ascetic, known for the severity of your austerities, that lasted for several thousands of years, as the humans would know time to be. You are known to be as strong as Vishnu himself. And yet, in any birth of yours, you were not informed of your own strength, unless you could acquire the skills to utilise your strength to the best of your ability with accompanying responsibility.”

“It is you, as Nara, and Kesava, as Narayana, who are custodians of this Universe, that was created by me. It is only you and Krishna, who can twang the mightiest of any bow created by the gods or by any man. The *Gandiva* has found its way to the best warrior ever. It was by illusion that I could exhaust your quivers of its arrows and again, it was by illusion that I could grab the *Gandiva* away from you.”

“Foremost among the blessings that I would grant you, O Arjuna, I give you, once again, quivers that would never be exhausted. O son of Kunti, O beloved of Madhava, it is with the best of my love and affection for you, O Kaunteya, I grant you my second blessing that you would never suffer from any form of disease or pain. Your skill, ability and expertise in war can never be bettered by anyone in the battlefield. You would have no enemy who cannot be defeated by you.”

“O Partha, ask me what you will, for I am most happy with you. I have fought the best of gods in many battles, and I have fought the best of asuras, rakshasas and danavas in the worst of battles. It was the prowess in your archery that made me bring out the best of my skills. There has never been a warrior or god or enemy who could challenge me to the best of my abilities in archery as you did. It has been many thousands of years since I have been able to achieve as amazing an excellence in archery as I could, when fighting against you. It is your skill and perfection in the use of the *Gandiva* that the mighty weapon has to achieve the same speed and ability, as you would require in battle. The mighty *Gandiva* does not fail you, and matches you well.”

Chastised, humbled, happier, content and continuing in his bliss, Arjuna bowed before Shiva and Parvati, and said, “Devi, bless me for being able to continue to seek Maheshwara’s grace forever. O Nandeewara, I wish to ask of you, the most powerful

weapon of all, the *Pasupata*, that one single weapon that has the power to destroy all of creation. I ask this of you, O Rudra, for it is this very weapon that symbolises all the terror if possible, of destruction that is possible, of the conflict that can be possible, and of the release of the most terrible of all destructive energy that can be possible. I ask the *Pasupata* from you, O Eswara.”

“In the Great War that is to come, in the greatest of all battles that would be fought, I would be facing the best of all warriors, and would fight my perceptor, Drona, who would know all that I know, my grand-sire, Bheeshma, who would know all the strategies that I would know of. I would fight the mentor of all the Pandavas and Kauravas, the great Kripacharya himself, and he would know of all the manner of battles that we would fight, and I would fight the one warrior I would not wish to challenge in war, Karna, the son of a charioteer, and yet, he is the one single warrior who would be able to fight me, arrow for arrow *astra* for *astra* and *mantra* for *mantra*.”

“Along with these great warriors, there would be hundreds of other armies, of hundreds and thousands of warriors, asuras, daanavas, demi-gods and nagas, and all other tribes and kingdoms that would be fighting on the side of the Kauravas. I need weapons that would allow me to kill them by the hundreds and I need weapons that would help me kill them by the thousands. I would also need weapons that would choose the best of warriors in a battle, and allow me to challenge them, skill for skill, and strategy for strategy, and come out, as the victor in each conflict.”

“O Someswara, I seek your blessings in obtaining weapons that could be multiplied in strength and would produce multiple weapons when released through the knowledge of specific mantras. I seek your blessings in the knowledge of these very

mantras that would help me in battle. There would be no other manner in which I would obtain victory in war against Bheeshma, Drona, Kripa or Karna.”

Shiva, in presence of Uma, blessed Arjuna, and said, “O Arjuna, you would be the most powerful in any battle. I grant you the use of the most powerful weapon of all, the *Pasupatastra*. O son of Indra, you would be the only warrior who would have the control over the astra, and would be the only one who would be able to hold the powerful weapon. You would be the only warrior who would be able to use it in battle, or withdraw it after it would have been cast against an enemy.”

“No god, not even Indra, nor Yudhishtra’s father, Yama, the god of death, nor Varuna, nor Vayu, can use the *Pasupatastra*. There has been no god, no asura, nor any rakshasa, who has been allowed to use the powerful *astra*. You would be the first human, O son of Kunti, who can use the *Pasupatastra*. But, let me warn you, O Kaunteya, the *astra*, the most powerful of all, should never be used in battle or against an enemy without any adequate cause, and without protecting the aspects of creation to be excluded from its anger. The *mantra* should be specific to choose the enemy, whom you would wish to be destroyed by the *astra*. This *astra* can be hurled by you, O Partha, with a mere thought in your mind, with a mere word, by use of the mantra, and also by stringing it within the *Gandiva*.”

Hearing Shiva speak thus, and hearing him grant the blessings that he had asked for, Arjuna bowed in gratitude, and said, “O Rudreswara, you who are the one who would bless me with the *Pasupatastra*, grant me knowledge of that mystery, the magic and the mantra of using the most powerful of all your *astras*.”

It is never been written and has never been known, the manner of the secret from purana to purana, from stotra to mantra to yantra, that the most amazing archer of all, *Pasupateswara* himself, for Rudra, it was he, who instilled the secrets of the use of the *Pasupatastra*, to Arjuna. It is said that there are only a very select few, of those whom Shiva agreed to allow the use of the *astra*, who knew of how to use the most powerful weapon of all.

And, thus, it came into being that, on that eventful day, Arjuna, the *Savyasachi*, was seen with his mighty *Gandiva* by his side, and with the powerful *Pasupatastra*, for there were only a very few who were blessed by Shiva, that they could see and thus receive his grace.

By his touch, Shiva enabled Arjuna to gain the strength that he had given away in pursuit of his austerities, and purged him of all the evil, his entire ego, the impatience and the arrogance of an imperfect warrior. From that moment when Shiva blessed the great warrior with his mere touch, it became impossible for Arjuna to be wrong in battle, in his manner of thought and strategy. Shiva blessed him to forever be accompanied by the mighty *Gandiva* and the *Pasupata*.

Arjuna bowed again in gratitude, with the two mighty weapons by his side, and offered his prayers to *Pashupati* and *Devi*. Both, Shiva and Parvati, blessed the mighty Pandava. In front of his very eyes, Arjuna watched, as the first of the gods, Rudra, with Uma by his side, rose high up into the nearby mountains and into the skies and the clouds that took them instantly in their folds.

In search of Shiva – further reading...

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About this book: Shiva as the amazing archer, and the wielder of the most powerful and most dangerous of weapons. The ***astras*** of Rudra. Shiva's blessings and support to Arjuna and the story of Kiratarjuniya.



The great Nandi facing the Kiratarjuniya sculpture at the Kailasanathar Temple, Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu. Photo: **Bharat Bhushan**.

About the Author: Bharat Bhushan – An eclectic and serendipitous vagrant in knowledge. **Email:** bharatbhushan@yahoo.com



The ancient Kiratarjuniya sculpture is at the **Kailasanathar Temple** at Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu. Photo: Bharat Bhushan